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Losing my Mother

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Mother had the thickest, waviest hair I had ever seen. A crown of black hair. Her face was narrow like her father's and she had an elongated nose. Her build was slight, and there was a delicate quality in her demeanor.

I ran to hide in mother's hair often, from father's harsh voice, from the street and people who looked mean. Mother was like afortress protecting me from evil, from the wrongs in the world. In her arms I believed the world was good and nothing bad could happen to me. I loved to look at her fabulous hair and run to her whenever something was threatening, like a barking dog on the way back from school, a reprimanding teacher. Mother was always there. In the kitchen, cooking our delicious dinners.

Chicken soup was her specialty. Carrot spears swimming in the golden broth. She was at the dining room table covered with linen cloth. Father was preoccupied thinking about his business, mother was always listening to the words I said.

On cold winter nights she warmed my blanket on a tall ceramic furnace and put it over me, soft like a seal coat. At other times she spread a blanket on the living room floor and we played dolls together building magic castles, creating princesses and trolls.

During the day I walked with mother in the street, and we went to toy stores. When I wanted something she couldn't afford like a huge doll house, she would explain gently why she had to refuse to buy them.

When I was frightened in the dark room at night, she would come in quietly, sit by me and tell a story. And when she thought I didn't behave well, it was enough for her to tell me, "I don't love you" and my whole world crumbled.

One day during the war the German soldiers came and took mother away. They didn't say why and for what reason. They didn't explain, just gripped my mother by the arm. I stood as if my legs had grown into the floor. I grabbed mother's arm and whispered, "No". My small feet tangled in boots of the soldier. He didn't seem to mind or maybe he didn't notice. He might have pretended he didn't see. Suddenly everything started shaking and rattling in the kitchen.

The spoons in the drawer rattled. The wide knee of my grandmother quivered. I still hung on to the sleeve of my mother's seal coat when the soldier took my hand away. Mother looked at me from under the crown of her black hair and sAID, "Zosienko". There were tears in her beautiful face. I followed mother and the soldier down to the street.

Another soldier was waiting and they whisked mother away. I looked at the tracks of her small shoes and couldn't move. When at last I went back toGranma's house and to the room where mother slept with me in the one bed, I stood looking around. My whole world darkened, as if black widow spiders crawled of the walls to seize me. I screamed but no one heard. I lay down on the bed we used to sleep on and wept. I held on to the sheets that still carried her scent, the scent of konwalja.

Sitting by the window I waited for mother to return. Grandmother and aunt Fela were too hungry and weak to pay attention to me. I was left to my own devices, feeling the terrible void my mother left. I had to construct an inner world built on fantasies. I would close my eyes and imagine mother was still with me, sitting and reading me a story. And when I opened my eyes and found myself in the bare room, my heart cried.

Every day I walked to the small cluttered library in the ghetto to get a new book. I crawled underneath the bed and buried myself in the pages. Aunt Fela and grandma couldn't find me and I could escape for a short hour the harsh reality.

I couldn't come to terms with the loss of my mother, and as much as I cried and wrote about her presence, her love was bitterly missed. and her leaving

She was the sunshine in my entangled psyche, the foundaTION SHE HELPED TO LAY IN MY CHILDHOOD. During many nights I called for her bringing to imagination the black crown of her hair. And this is what I most vividly remember today.

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Sweet Revenge

Zlateh was ten years old, and she lived in a ghetto in Poland, in a city called Brzeziny. The street she lived on, Borboska St. was closed off from other streets of the city by barbed wire. Soldiers stood armed with guns and watched that no Jewish woman, child or man would tresspass to the other side.

There were no stores in the ghetto. No bakeries in the ghetto, no schools in the ghetto; only drabby little places dark like holes where food was rationed. On Shabbat, Zlate's mother took a pair of candles she had hidden and put them inside potato slices she had saved from potato peels we had cooked for dinner. There was no wine, no silver Kiddush cup her father used to hold in his hand, no white table cloth and no golden candlesticks her mother used to bless the Shabbat with.

One Shabbat evening after mother blessed the candles inside the potato slices, in their small room on a tiny table that was like a doll's table, they all went outdoors and walked close to the ghetto's barbed fence. The soldier with the rifle looked as if he were asleep. His eyes were closed and the gun was at his feet. Zlate's mother had an idea. "Zlateh, You don't have a very Jewish-looking face.Here, put this kerchief on your head and you'll look like a shikseh. See, here is a narrow opening in the fence. You just run through it and go to buy a chaleh in Maciek's bakery. He always used to have a few chale's for the Jews and they were good and fresh."

Zlateh looked at her mother. That would be fun she thought. Being only ten years old she didn't thin k of the danger. How wonderful to walk on the streets like everyone else in such freedom, and go to the bakery she imagined. Her mother gave her paper money, a zloty and coins. She tied the kerchief on Zlate's head, and Zlate ran through the open space in the

barbed wire fence. Now she was like everyone else. Like other children walking in the street, laughing and jumping, their faces rosy in the wind. And the wind blew in her face too. The wind didn't come often inside the ghetto. The mean soldiers must have been keeping it out. She saw leaves falling from trees, red and yellow leaves of autumn. She saw a few flowers that forgot to bloom in the spring. They have taken out all the trees from the ghetto and flowers didn't bloom there. Zlateh started hopping, so joyful ~~that~~ she was in the street where everyone else was. But she remembered she had to go to Maciek's bakery to buy a chaleh for Shabbat. She already smelled the wonderful aromas of fresh baked bread, cookies and cakes. In the bakery there were many people waiting. Zlateh looked on the shelves but she couldn't see a chaleh. Maciek must have forgotten to bake them because all the Jews were in the ghetto. There was golden bread and dark bread. There were cookies and napoleons and round cream tortes. Zlateh loved napoleons, the light pastry filled with layers of white cream. Maybe she would have enough money to buy one napoleon, one single napoleon. She came to the counter, and Maciek, the baker, recognized her. His eyes jumped in surprise.

"What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in..."? he looked around at all the people and stopped in mid-sentence. He pretended he didn't know here and no one else noticed. Zlateh felt a little scared. If someone told the German soldiers about her tresspassing the barbed wire fence of the ghetto, they could take her and kill her, and kill her mother and father. Her face became as white as the paper bags Maciek packed the bread in.

"Can I help you?" he asked quietly

"I want this golden round bread", she said in a firm voice. "And if I have enough money left, I want to buy one napoleon" she said with a glee in her eye. She put on the counter her zloty and her polish coins.

"That's fine, Maciek said." "You get a little change too." He put her crisp warm bread in a white bag and put her napoleon in a special box. He put everything together in a larger bag. She liked the way Maciek the baker was handling all this. She thanked him and left the bakery.On the street she walked carrying her bag like other people did who went shopping and carried their packages. She wanted to take another walk and watch a dog who seemed to be lost and wagging his tail to her. But she thought it would be ~~the~~ best to return to her mother and father. They would be happy with what she was bringing for them. She came to the barbed wire fence and the narrow opening, but the soldier who was asleep just a little while ago, walked back and forth with great energy, the gun dangling from his shoulder. Not far from him, inside the fence were her mother and father waiting. Zlateh stopped and didn't know what to do. She just walked in one place waiting for a safe moment to sneak inside the ghetto. Suddenly, a bird descended from heaven, a large crow, and shat on the soldier's nose. He started sneezing and cursing, trying to wipe his nose. In that moment, Zlateh slipped inside the wires of the ghetto where her parents were. She showed them what she brought. They had a wonderful Shabbat dinner. After dinner, Zlateh sat and enjoyed her scrumptious napoleon. She prayed for a hundred crows to fly in and shit defacated on all the German soldiers guarding the ghetto.

A LibrARY IN THE Ghetto

Irusia loved to go to the little library that was so close to her home she could walk there in five minutes. The library consisted of one room full of books that crowded the shelves. Some books were so squeezed in, it was difficult to see their backs and read the titles. And some books were old, worn and missed pages, and some pages just dangled on single threads. Janek and Sonia were very able and faithful librarians. They knew where every book was on the crowded shelves. Irusia went to the library almost every day to get a new book. She would come home and hide under the bed to read. She hid so no one in the house will find her. Grandma will not ask to help in the kitchen, and aunt Fela will not ask to clean the floor. She didn't want to do chores in a kitchen where there was no food. A sad kitchen where potato peels were cooked for breakfast and dinner and the pots were empty.

One day when Irusia was at the library standing in line and waiting for her new book, a German soldier came in suddenly with a thump of his tall boots. The books trembled on the shelves and hid inside their worn jackets. Irusia huddled behind the person in front of her.

"Jewish children read books, hah?" he laughed. "you don't need to read books." With his arms in the Gestapo uniform, and with his hands in black gloves, he started throwing all the books from the shelves till there was was a big pile of torn pages on the floor. The pages squeeked and cried in all the letters and words printed on them. They wailed in a big lament. Everyone was silent in the room. Sonia and Janek too. But Irusia suddenly started crying. She was waiting for her book and now all the books in a pile and she could hear their lamenting voices. The German officer stopped. He looked at her and at the pile of books in front of him, and became veryquiet.

He didn't do what to do with his eyes. He turned on on a heel and walked out of the librARY AS SUDDENLY AS HE CAme.^There was a silence in the small library. The pile of books, the torn books stopped lamenting too. And then Sonia and Janek said: let's sort all the pages and put the books together again. Everyone helped. Marek, Tusia, Kazio and Irusia. They all worked very hard putting all the pages together, gluing the backs of the books to hold them. They worked all night like little elves, and the shelves filled again with books. The books were a little frailer and more worn, but they stood there on the shelves like faithful warriors ready to be used again. Some books were beyond repair and had to be discarded. When all the books were revived and stood together on the shelves, Sonia came over to Irusia holding a book in her hand."Here, she said is the book you wanted for some time already." It was the "Yearling" by Rawlings. A big smile bloomed in Irusia's face as she took the book and skipped happily home where her father and grandmother were concerned about her absence but as it was the way of the ghetto, they already heard what happened at the library and they were happy to see her home. They weren't happy though to see another fat book under her arm because this meant hiding underneath the bed and not doing her chores. But who said that grown ups are fair?

A Conversation with Herr Meister from Wütemberg

I Herr Meister!

HM Yes...No.. who is this?

I It's me, from Ravensbrück.

HM silence.

I Do you remember Herr Meister?

HM I don't want to remember. I am a good German citizen now.

I: Herr Meister, but I still dream of swastikas.

HM What can I do about your dreams?

I But Herr Meister, you helped me when I was a little more than a child. You made hair pins for me from steel, you brought bits of food.

HM Bits of food? I don't remember.

I Herr Meister, do you remember the torch I used to heat water with under your work table to wash my under garment?

HM Why dredge up stuff like that? This was forty five years ago. I am an old man now.

I But you must remember Herr Meister.

HM What's the use? I enjoy my grandchildren. I enjoy the prosperity of Deutschland. I don't want to remember the war.

I Herr Meister, you were a good man. Have you turned into a Jew hater or something?

HM I don't hate anybody. I don't want any trouble. We stay away from Jews. Our friends like it that way the best. And we don't like to talk about the war.

I But I remember you. I tried to find you for many years.

HM Why disturb my peace? Why not leave the past alone?

I So you are not talking to Jews because your friends don't like it. What happened to your courage?

HM I had courage and the Gestapo caught me. They put me in jail. I almost lost my life like the prisoners in Ravensbrück.

I Yes. You disappeared one day. And my heart dropped in fear. I thought they would kill me. The man who took your place was stern and cruel.

HM ~~When I was in jail~~, Sometimes I wondered who looked after das kleine Mädchen.

I No one did. Not even God.

HM It must have been cold without the torch.

I I had no blanket at night. The lice lived in my little jacket by the hundreds and multiplied.

HM And there were not bits of food for you to eat in the bathroom, so no one will find out.

I Someone stole my bread too. Remember the bread I used to save in a yellow sack you gave me?

HM A yellow sack with a string around it. Ja.

I One night after the air raid I walked back to the barrack in the cold snow. When I came to my bed, the bread was gone. The bread I saved every day so I will not be hungry. Only the sack was dangling on its string.

HM I was in jail where the Gestapo threw me.

I One day soon they ran away. The Gestapo women and men ran away. They took off at midday. On motorcycles, in cars, they left everything.

HM And what did das kleine Mädchen do?

I All the women went to raid the kitchen. They pounded on a heavy door with their fists. Hundreds of starved women. I was the youngest and I was afraid. I had an idea to go to the barrack where the Aufseherinnen lived. And I persuaded a young woman to come with me.

HM Outside the camp? Where the guard always marched?

I Yes, but the guard soldiers ran away too.

HM Hm. So what did you find there?

I First we found meat and potatos on a hot plate. Brown chunks of meat and golden potatos still warm. They tasted delicious. It wasn't enough but there was no more food in the barrack.

HM They left in a hurry. Didn't even finish their dinner. What did you do after you had your first decent meal in six years?

I We went to the bedroom and started looking inside drawers.

We found blouses, skirts and stockings. I tried on a pair of clumsy black shoes that didn't fit me. Mascha tried on brassiers. There was a mirror there and for the first time in a year I looked at myself. Herr Meister, do you remember what I looked like?

HM You were always ein schönes mädchen, a pretty girl. You were very thin and pale. This is why I promised to take you to my house and hide you in the cellar, so they won't kill you, but the Gestapo discovered me.

I I remember that. When I looked in the mirror that evening, I was terrified. I saw this long drawn face. The only thing that didn't lose flesh in my face was my nose. My eyes were very large. I couldn't recognize myself.

HM Years of starvation change human beings.

I We started packing up a suitcase with panties, sweaters and skirts. Belts for dresses and beads. But suddenly something happened.

I What?

I I heard German voices outside the window and a rattling of guns.

HM Did they shoot? Did they catch you?

I No. We didn't turn on lights in the barrack, so I don't think they saw us. There was a light of the moon I remember.

HM What happened?

I We left everything and I motioned Mascha to follow me. We lowered our bodies to the floor and started crawling toward the door. We crawled on the ground in the dark night. We heard German voices. There were two of them. We heard the rattling of guns. We continued crawling and holding our breath. I don't know to this day if the guards saw us or not. We were so close and they had flood lights. They must have been drunk not to see us.

HM Maybe the demon of war, the Hitler demon left them. They knew the end was near and why kill more?

I They did not touch us and we crawled inside gates of the camp exhausted and relieved.

We lost our freedom but we survived.

HM What did you find in camp?

I The Aufseherinnen. It seemed as if life assumed its dreadful course again with their shouting, commanding voices.The deadly routine was on but not for long.

HM Yes.

I They left again. Suddenly. They left in the greatest hurry when the signal came. They didn't say a word to us. They just vanished on jeep, motorcycle or any set of wheels available.

HM and at last you were free.

I No, the hardest part began then. The war came very close. Right behind the barbed wire of Ravensbrück camp.

HM What do you mean?

I The fighting. The artillery shots. The whistling of bullets right by our nose.

HM What did you do? Was there anyone to guide you?

I No. We hid inside the bunker and we stayed there for three days and three nights. Without water, without food. Only the pail of shit. The pail of shit.

HM The pail of shit?

I Herr Meister, only the pail of shit passed from one hand to another. Only the terrible stench in the dark bunker. And the sound of bullets outside.

HM How did you get out of there?

I On the third day Russian soldiers came and inquired who we were. As if it was hard to recognize. Some of us lay on the ground unconscious.

HM What did the Russians do?

I They told us to run ahead.

HM And?

I I was the first one to leave that dark, filthy bunker. ~~On the ground~~ on the ground. I saw smoldering bodies of German soldiers. I saw swastikas burning. The bullets whistled above my head. I fell to the ground, several times.

HM This was the last battle?

I I saw a woman carried on a stretcher. ~~Blood on her head. She was a woman~~ that woman. I knew, She was in the same barrack with me. She

She died on that day. She died on the day of liberation. She died and I was free. Her image comes back to haunt me. But I ran ahead saying Kaddish in my head: Yitgadal Veyitkadsh Smei Rabah. Do you know anything about the Kaddish Herr Meister? I have been saying it for my MOTHER, for my sister, for my father, for the uncles, the aunts, the cousins, for all the grandparents. Do you know what that means, Herr Meister?

HM I hear. I don't know the Kaddish, ~~It is not my~~ prayer.

I It is a sacred very ancient prayer said in memory of the dead, and in reverence for life.

HM I understand.

I I have been saying Kaddish in memory of the dead. It has been difficult to celebrate life.

HM But what about now? What about das Leben?

I Herr Meister, Can you say it with me? The first three words of the Kaddish in memory of my family?

HM Ja, mein kleines Mädchen.

Together: Yitgadal Veyitkadash Shmeh Rabah.

Second Meeting
with Herr Meister from Wütemberg

I Herr Meister, I need to tell you what happened after I ran through the whistling bullets.

HM Ja. Ja. I want to know.

I I ran ahead. And there was no fighting there. The Germans fled and I saw many Russian soldiers. They were friendly and helped me get rid of my prison uniform. This dark ugly thing with white stripes, remember?

HM I remember very well.

I Now I wish I saved the uniform for posterity. But then I didin't care, I just wanted to be free.

HM The Jews saved many of those uniforms.

I Yes. And they are historic artifacts people come to view in museums.

HM That part of German history will not be erased, and will always be a black mark on our conscience.

I The Germans fled. They all fled and left everything behind. Their beautiful homes, their cloth, their food, all their belongings.

HM Ja. I left the prison when the Americans came, and I didn't know where to go. My home in Wütemberg was far away and I didn't know what I would find there.

I What did you do?

HM I wandered around for awhile feeling bad about being a a German. Looking at the terrible destruction in our country. Hearing about the destruction in Europe, in Russia. And all the concentration camps in Germany; Dachau, Auschwitz, Bergen Belsen and others I didn't know about. And I thought to myself, I didn't even succeed to save one soul.

I And now you know. You helped to save a soul. But I had a good time. I found a large home, a very rich home. In the cellar there were home made canned fruits and vegetables. Cream white butter, Cheeses white and yellow. Fat sausages hung from the rafters. There were tall sacks of sugar and flour. Rooms with real beds, do you hear Herr Meister? Real beds with fluffy comforters, clean sheets and real pillows.

Can you imagine a pillow to be able to put under my head? I must have been dreaming of angels on that first night, in that German home.

HM Were you alone?

I There were about four or five women with me and I was the youngest. I was the youngest in the concentration camp too, in our barrack. The women went to work in the kitchen, and I did whatever they told me. You have not seen so many pots cooking food all day. Soup, meatloaf, potatos, carrots. Cakes and cookies were baked in the oven. I remember the countless cookie sheets. We did not need to go to the market, and the markets were plundered and closed anyway. We found all the food we needed in that German home.

HM All that was "gut" for you.

I Well, we couldn't digest the food. We ran to the bathroom all day and night. Whatever we put in came right out.

HM Your stomach forgot how to ~~digest food~~. do the work.

I After a week or so we were better. We got used a little to food normal people eat.

HM How long did you stay in that house?

I Maybe two weeks. Long enough to feel stronger. But I need to tell you what happened one night in that home.

HM Yes?

I Listen Herr Meister. One night when it was dark outside and we were finishing dinner, a Russian soldier dragged himself inside the door. He was staggering and smelled of alcohol. He had black hair and dark skin. He just stood there hardly able to keep his feet on the floor. The women fled, one after another quietly they left the room.

HM What did you do?

I I didn't feel like running from the drunken soldier. I stood there. He pulled a black revolver and pointed at me. I moved a little and he started following me with the pointed revolver in his hand. And I kept looking straight at him.

HM You were not afraid?

I Not in the least. Here I was free for the first time since the war started. I wasn't going to give my freedom to this drunken soldier.

HM Did he leave?

I The most curious thing happened. The soldier dropped his revolver and started crying. He confessed to me he was a Jew and asked forgiveness. This was touching in a way but I was happy when he left. Who was I to forgive anyone?

HM Many German women were raped by Russian soldiers.

I I didn't care about any of that.

HM What happened later?

I More Russian soldiers visited. One of them wanted to marry me. He told me he was rich. He owned twenty watches and they were buried by his house in Russia. This was very amusing. Shortly we left that house. I packed a small suitcase and started thinking about going back to Poland. To find out who else from my family survived the war.

HM I hope you had a good journey.

I Thank you, Herr Meister.